DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 075 847 24 CS 200 505

TITLE	A Handful of "Nothings," and Also Some Other Poems: Literature Curriculum, Levels C-D [Grades Three and Four]; Teacher's Guide.
INSTITUTION	Oregon Univ., Eugene. Oregon Elementary English Project.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Bureau of Research.
BUREAU NO	BR-8-0143
PUB DATE	71
CONTRACT	OEC-0-8-080143-3701
NOTE	63p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Child Language; Children; Composition (Literary); *Creative Writing; Curriculum Guides; *Elementary Education; Grade 3; Grade 4; *Imagination; Literature; *Literature Appreciation; Memorizing; Metaphors; *Poetry
IDENTIFIERS	*Oregon Elementary English Project

ABSTRACT

This curriculum guide is intended to introduce elementary school students to the reading and writing of poetry. Poems by recognized poets make up the bulk of the selections in the guide, but some poems by elementary school students are also included. The writers hope that the teacher will use the guide to encourage students to write their own poetry and to recognize that poetry can be a form of inspired play. Suggestions for teaching the poems and numerous illustrations are included. (See related documents CS 200 500-504, and CS 200 506-508.) (DI)

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ED 075847

Literature Curriculum, Levels C - D

A HANDFUL OF 'NOTHINGS,'

AND ALSO SOME OTHER POEMS

Developed under contract with the
United States Office of Education
Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

by

The Oregon Elementary English Project
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon
1971

CS 200505

A HANDFUL OF 'NOTHINGS,'
AND ALSO SOME OTHER POEMS

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READING AND WRITING POETRY: TO THE TEACHER

I. Trying to get people to write poetry is often unsuccessful. True, students do the classroom exercise, they find better ways of saying "Quiet as a mouse," but poetry is out as soon as school is, and in his later years the student, if he looks back at all upon poetry, often does so as he would upon an old, faded photograph--now hardly recognizable.

We can get students to write, but seldom do we get them to want to write. Only one thing can make a person want to write: inspiration. The best reason for writing has always been that the person cannot help writing. He really has no choice; this "playing with words" is bubbling through his veins and he's going to boil over with something--he's got no choice. Writing poetry should be like any other play activity: you don't need to talk the boy into playing baseball, or the girl into riding her pony. They don't need to talk themselves into it.

Writing poetry should have the same motivation. It should be because people cannot help but want to. It should be that somewhere, at some time (and hopefully recurring often) they have been inspired; something has blown the breath of creativity into their imaginations--and they are alive with it. Such inspiration is worth a thousand pleadings and coaxings.

But where does it come from, this inspiration? Wherever it comes from--and it comes from many places--it is a gift, a gift that is not the poem, but the music with which to write the poem. And the only qualification is to be there when the handing out takes place.

This is the best we can do as teachers and writers: to make ourselves available, put ourselves into that imaginative world of inspiration. It is then that we have a chance to be tapped on the shoulder and given the nod of inspiration. Even this will not assure our hearing (and understanding), but without it we haven't a chance.

II. This book is designed to help make the poetry world available to students. We hope they get excited enough about some of these poems to say, "Hey! I'd like to write something like that."

If they are inspired, it is up to us as teachers to help them cultivate that inspiration. We can best do this by recognizing what forms the inspiration is likely to take. If anything is predictable about writing, it is that it will probably assume one, or a combination, of four ways of writing: copy, imitation, influence, or originality. They rarely take effect in this order, and none of them is ever completely abandoned by the writer. All of them should be recognized and encouraged.

In writing, copying another's work, if done openly, is no vice; in fact it should be encouraged for the beginning writer. The important thing is that the child be working with words. Copying, perhaps directly out of this book into a notebook, gets the child in touch with the "physicality' of poetry; the poem gets to move around in the child's body, down along the arm and onto paper. A very useful method of copying is memorization--copying in the mind. It is deadly policy to require memorization (you cannot require inspiration either) but memorization should be made available. Memorization is the best way to internalize poetry: it puts that world of inspiration right up against the heart.

Some of the poems in this book have been specifically annotated in order to help use the next way of writing, imitation. It is vital for the beginning writer to imitate as many different writing styles as possible. The only true choice (here, of writing styles) is one which gets to choose from all possibilities.

"Influence" is difficult to recognize. No writer stops being influenced by other writers. We should help the young writer recognize possible influences, writing that seems most like his, and encourage him to develop under its influence.

No writer is ever completely original. The very words he uses belong to a long tradition of speaking and writing. Originality should not be an all-consuming end; the in-between processes should be as important. Originality will come but only after a lot of work--a lot of joyful work--and, surely, a lot of luck. And this is really all we can do as teachers, as guides to the worlds of inspiration: after opening the doors and encouraging this joyful work, to wish them good luck.

POETRY AND POETRY WRITING: TO THE YOUNG WRITERS

Poetry is a special language using ordinary words. You might not understand or even like it at first--but don't give up. Don't let it scare you away. It is full of fun. If you wait long enough, as in a line for a matinee, it will show you a world as exciting as Disneyland. It will take you to zoos where thoughts have become strange and exotic animals. The most ordinary things will dance before you like clowns. You'll sit back and watch; you'll laugh and maybe even get sad once in awhile--but you will have a good time. And you'll want to come back often.

You might even want to write your own poetry. Maybe you have discovered that poetry is your own language, your own way of saying what the world is like--for you. Maybe some people look at the clouds and say, "It sure is cloudy today." But you disagree; you think it is more than that. You see shapes to the clouds and say, "Dark horses are galloping after the sun." You know they are clouds--any fool can see that--but you see beyond the obvious clouds. For you the clouds take the shapes of horses, and for at least that one creative moment, they gallop before your imagination as real clouds could never do. You try to capture them so they will not escape your memory. You corral them in a poem:

The clouds are horses
galloping after the sun.
They shade its light
with dark flying manes.
Flames shoot out their nostrils
as their hoof-beats shake
the sky into rain.

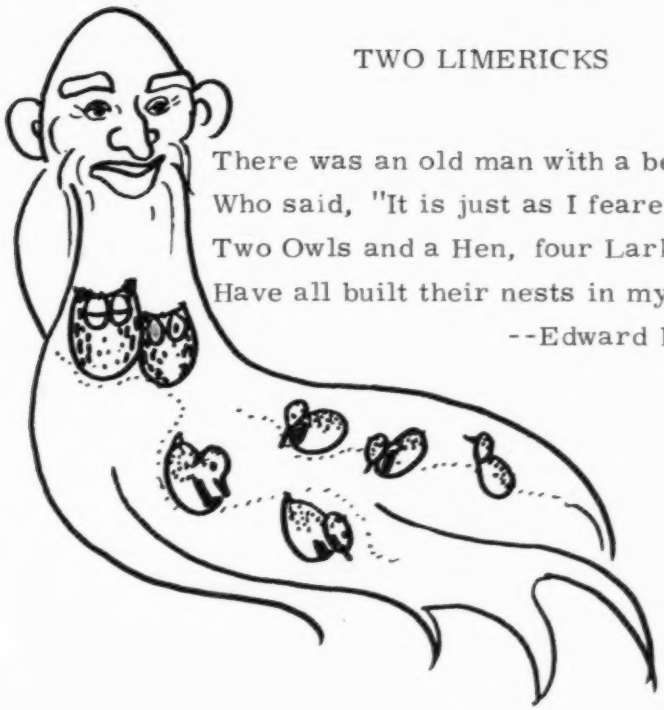
Clouds take lots of different shapes; so can everything else in the world. Maybe you look at cars on the freeway and see frightened animals with great big eyes stampeding out of the city. Whatever you see, poetry lets you tell about it. Whatever shapes there are hidden in the world, poetry is your way of discovering and recording those shapes.

pp. 1-7 ("Two Limericks," "A Lot of Nothings," "Two More Limericks")

"Formula writing" is writing that follows a strict form. The limerick is the best example. "Formula writing" is an especially good practice for beginning writers because it gives them a ready-made mold with which to begin.

These poems follow the tradition of "formula writing." This makes them especially available for writing exercises. Have the whole class try some first, to get the feel of the formula, and then individuals on their own. Also, if they can, have them create their own formulas. They do not have to be complicated. For instance, the poem on page 12 might be considered a formula poem. The formula is a one-sentence poem that asks a question--imaginatively. The use of metaphor (fog = cold breath) contributes to its being a poem.

TWO LIMERICKS



There was an old man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!--
Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a Wren
Have all built their nests in my beard."
--Edward Lear

There was an old person of Dean
Who dined on one pea, and one bean;
For he said, "More than that
Would make me too fat,"
That cautious old person of Dean.
--Edward Lear

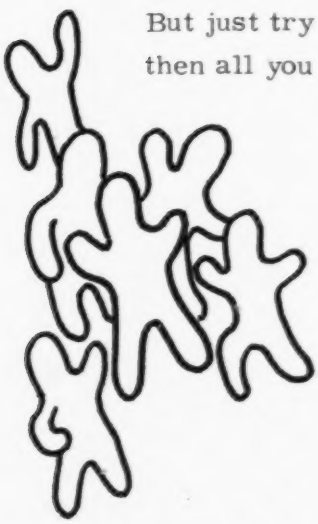
A LOT OF NOTHINGS

Nothing's as odd as a pig with a wig;
one had his on at the dance.
We thought when he danced on his hands for sport,
he was taking a terrible chance.

--W. V.

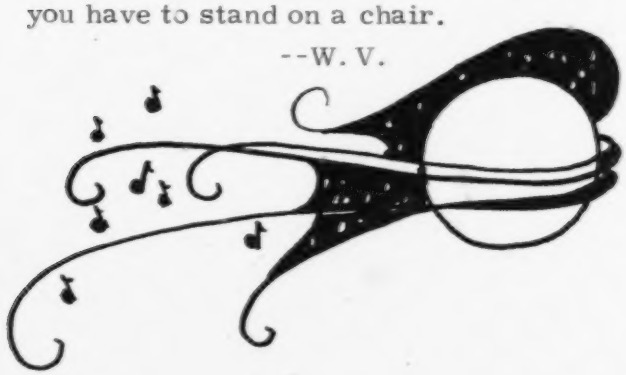
Nothing gets done like a lot of fun;
there's never a shortage of help.
But just try getting people to work;
then all you hear is a yelp!

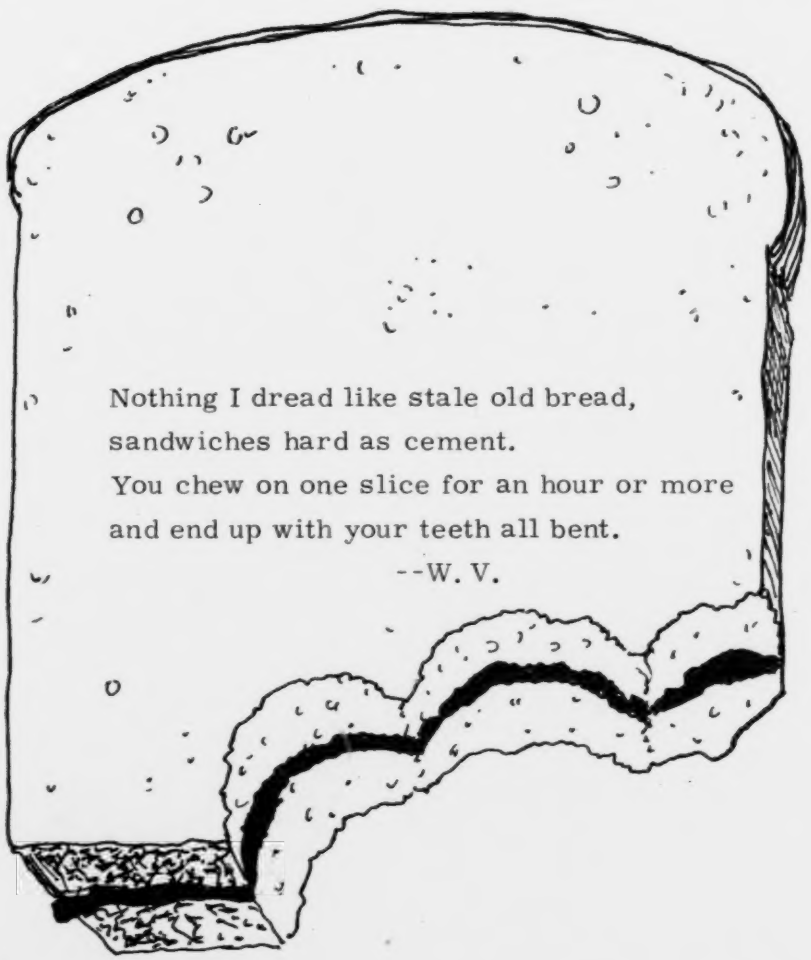
-- W.V.



Nothing's as soft as a tune on the moon
hummed by an astronaut there.
It's so hard to hear him back on Earth--
you have to stand on a chair.

--W. V.





Nothing I dread like stale old bread,
sandwiches hard as cement.
You chew on one slice for an hour or more
and end up with your teeth all bent.

--W. V.

Nothing's as crooked as a dog's jog--
he runs in a wriggily line.
Every eight miles you run with him,
he really runs about nine.

--W. V.

Nothing's more stuck than a fly in pie--
unless it's a flea in tea.
Maybe a bunny in honey's worse off;
or maybe that fly now in me.

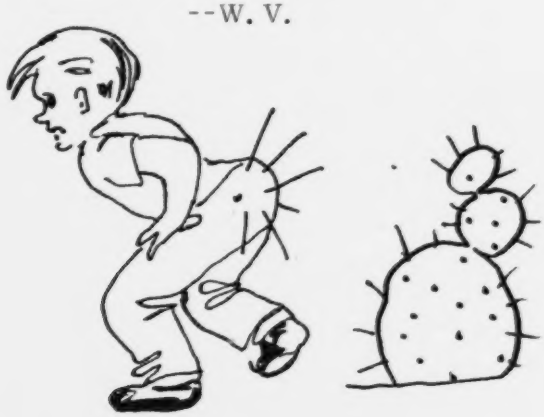
--W. V.

Nothing's as strange as a lark with a bark;
from the top of the tree he bow wows.
It startles the other animals,
except for the cow that meows.

--W. V.

Nothing's as rough as the jolt of a colt;
he's terribly hard to ride.
Mine bucked me off on a cactus plant,
and hurt a lot more than my pride.

--W. V.



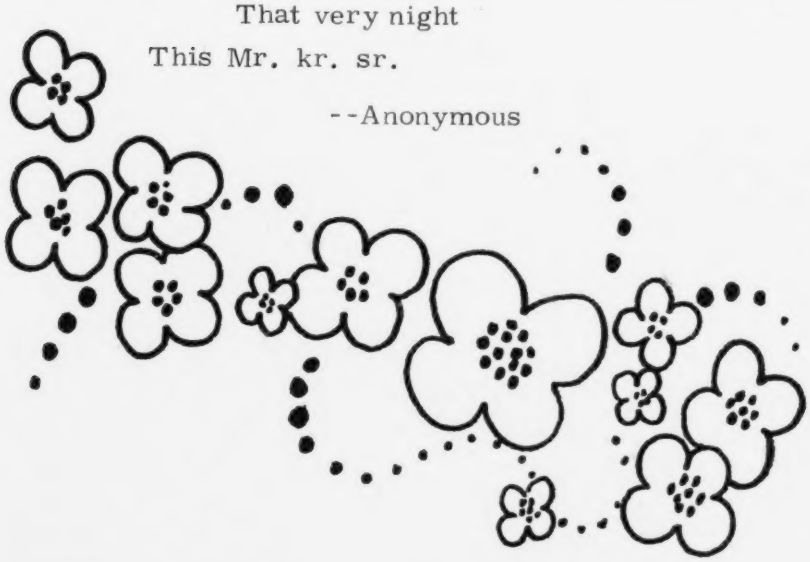
Nothing's as weird as a bird with a beard;
it hides his robin's redbreast.
When I asked him what good all that hair was for,
he replied, "Why, it makes a great nest!"

--W. V.

TWO MORE LIMERICKS

She frowned and called him Mr.
Because in sport he kr.
And so in spite
That very night
This Mr. kr. sr.

--Anonymous



There was a young lady named Bright,
Who travelled much faster than light.
She started one day
In the relative way,
And returned on the previous night.

--Anonymous

PEAS

I eat my peas with honey,
I've done it all my life.
It makes the peas taste funny,
But it keeps them on my knife.

--Anonymous

p. 9 ("Mister Fox")

This poem may be read, then followed by the song version. There are any number of variations to this poem. Ask your students if they know a different set of words.

A fox went out in a hungry plight,
And he begged for the moon to give him light,
For he'd many miles to go that night,
Before he could reach his den O!

And first he came to a farmer's yard,
Where the ducks and geese declared it hard
That their nerves should be shaken and their rest be marr'd,
By the visit of Mister Fox O!

He took the grey goose by the sleeve;
Says he, "Madam Goose, and by your leave,
I'll take you away without reprieve
And carry you home to my den O!"

He seized the black duck by the neck,
And swung her over across his back;
The black duck cried out, "Quack! Quack! Quack!"
With her legs all dangling down O!

Then old Mrs. Slipper-Slopper jump'd out of bed,
And out of the window she popp'd her head,
Crying, "John, John, John, the grey goose is gone,
And the fox is away to his den O!"

Then John he went up to the top of the hill,
And he blew a blast both loud and shrill;
Says the fox, "That is very pretty music--still
I'd rather be in my den O!"

At last the fox got home to his den;
To his dear little foxes, eight, nine, ten,
Says he, "You're in luck, here's a good fat duck
With her legs all dangling down O!"

He then sat down with his hungry wife;
They did very well without fork or knife;
They'd never ate better in all their life,
And the little ones picked the bones O!

--Anonymous

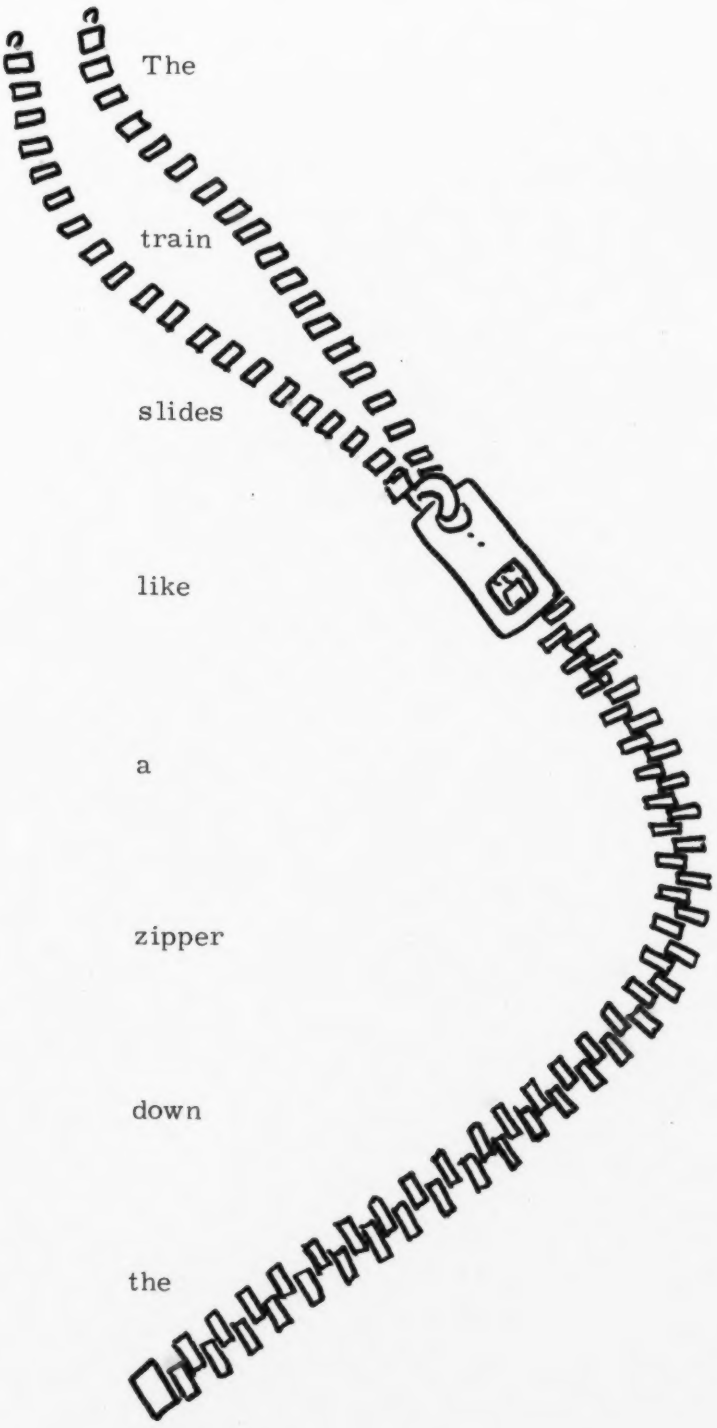
pp. 12 - 16 ("Morning Fog," "The Train Slides," "Gravity," Haiku)

These poems should show the young writers that poems do not have to rhyme and are not necessarily long. The shortest, most poignant lines are material for a poem. Imagist poetry, the mere presentation of single, sharp images, is a very available form for the young writer.

Haiku poems also should be considered as a form for the beginning writer. The haiku presents an image in a 3-line stanza, of which line 1 has five syllables, line 2 has seven syllables, and line 3 has five. Haiku can express an image that appeals to any of the senses. See pp. 15 and 16.

MORNING FOG

What giant
has let his
breath go?
--W. V.



The

train

slides

like

a

zipper

down

the

tracks.

--W. V.

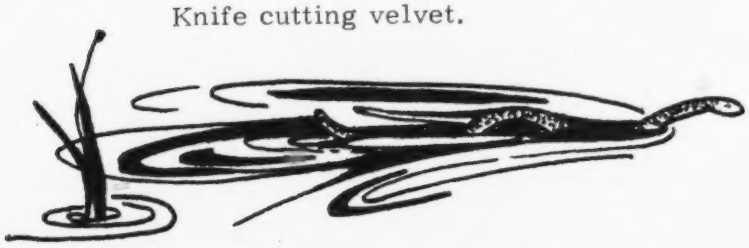
GRAVITY

That pickpocket
who robs you
when you're standing
on your hands.

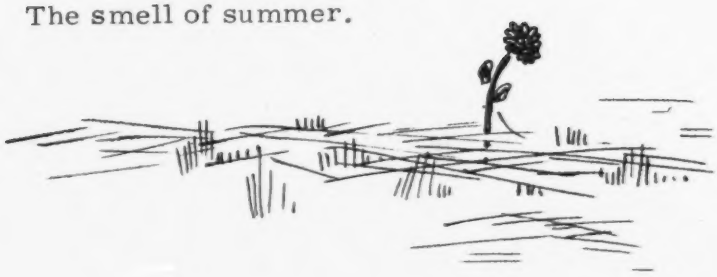
--W. V.

FIVE HAIKU

Across the green pond
A small water-snake slithers. . .
Knife cutting velvet.



The freshly cut grass,
Slowly drying in the sun. . .
The smell of summer.



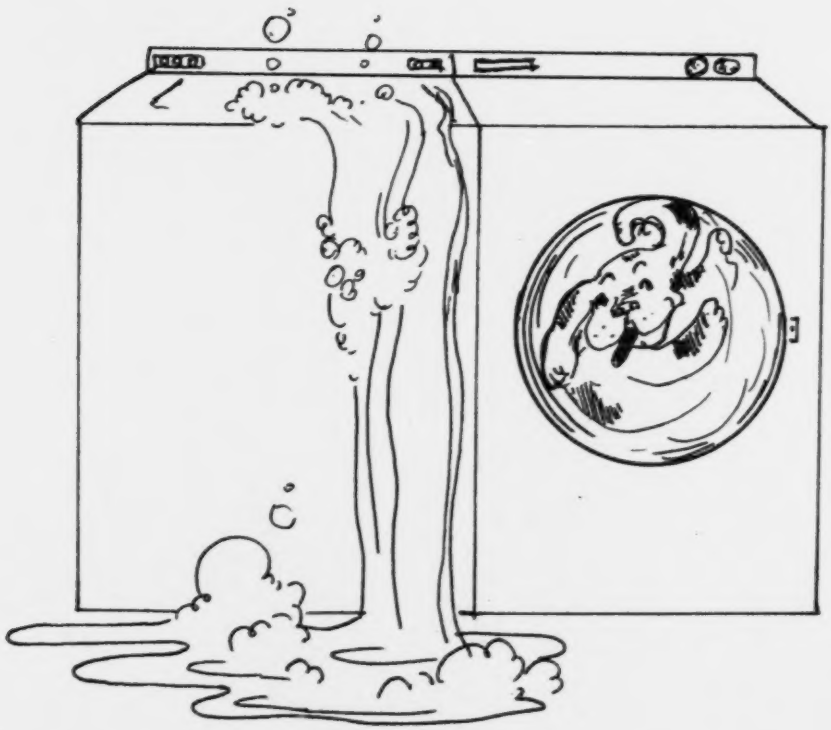
Autumn rains begin. . .
Drip drip on the roof all night,
Wet leaves on the grass.

Soon you will be gone.
Who tells you snow is coming,
O south-flying geese?

The boat's whistle,
The cry of the seagulls. . .
Lonely harbor noises.

My spick and span spaniel
keeps spotlessly clean;
he washes himself
in a washing machine.
He soaks in the soap
like a sponge till he's sopping,
then shakes himself off
till the floor needs mopping.
If you think that I'm kidding,
if you think I'm a liar,
you should come by right now
while he's still in the dryer.

--W. V.



Our cat is fast,
faster than the fly,
and heavier.
--W. V.

"The Vulture," from The Bad Child's Book of Beasts, by Hilaire Belloc. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1930.

THE WALRUS AND THE CARPENTER

The sun was shining on the sea,
  Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
  The billows smooth and bright--
And this was odd, because it was
  The middle of the night.

The moon was shining sulkily,
  Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
  After the day was done--
"It's very rude of him," she said,
  "To come and spoil the fun!"

The sea was wet as wet could be,
  The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud, because
  No cloud was in the sky:
No birds were flying overhead--
  There were no birds to fly.

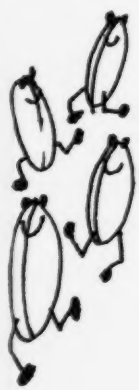
The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand:
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
"If this were only cleared away,"
They said, "it would be grand!"

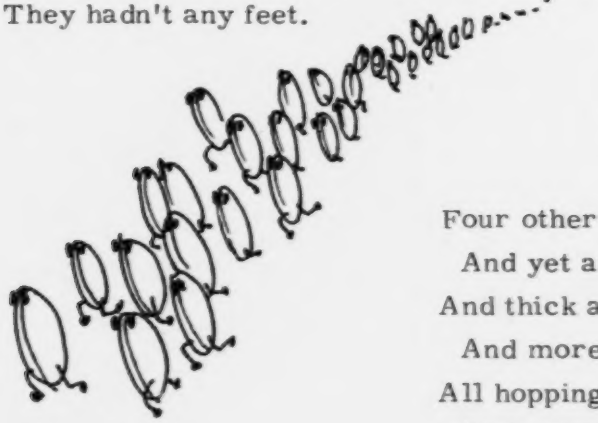
"If seven maids with seven mops
Swept it for half a year,
Do you suppose," the Walrus said,
"That they could get it clear?"
"I doubt it," said the Carpenter,
And shed a bitter tear.

"O Oysters, come and walk with us!"
The Walrus did beseech.
"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach:
We cannot do with more than four,
To give a hand to each."

The eldest Oyster looked at him,
But never a word he said:
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
And shook his heavy head--
Meaning to say he did not choose
To leave the oyster-bed.

But four young Oysters hurried up,
All eager for the treat:
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,
Their shoes were clean and neat--
And this was odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet.





Four other Oysters followed the
And yet another four;
And thick and fast they came at last,
And more, and more, and more--
All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore.

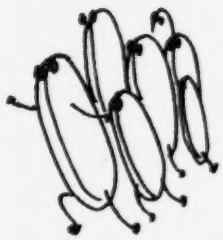
The Walrus and the Carpenter
Walked on a mile or so,
And then they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row.

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes - and ships - and sealing wax--
Of cabbages - and kings--
And why the sea is boiling hot--
And whether pigs have wings."

"But wait a bit," the Oysters cried,
"Before we have our chat;
For some of us are out of breath,
And all of us are fat!"
"No hurry!" said the Carpenter.
They thanked him much for that.

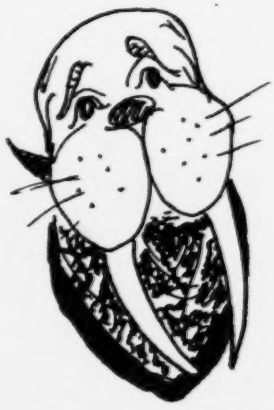
"A loaf of bread," the Walrus said,
"Is what we chiefly need:
Pepper and vinegar besides
Are very good indeed--
Now, if you're ready, Oysters dear,
We can begin to feed."

"But not on us!" the Oysters cried,
Turning a little blue.
"After such kindness, that would be
A dismal thing to do!"
"The night is fine" the Walrus said.
"Do you admire the view?



"It was so kind of you to come!
And you are very nice!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"Cut us another slice.
I wish you were not quite so deaf--
I've had to ask you twice!"

"It seems a shame," the Walrus said,
"To play them such a trick.
After we've brought them out so far,
And made them trot so quick!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"The butter's spread too thick!"



"I weep for you," the Walrus said:
"I deeply sympathize."
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size,
Holding his pocket-handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes.

"O Oysters," said the Carpenter,
"You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?"
But answer came there none--
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one.

--Lewis Carroll

COLOR

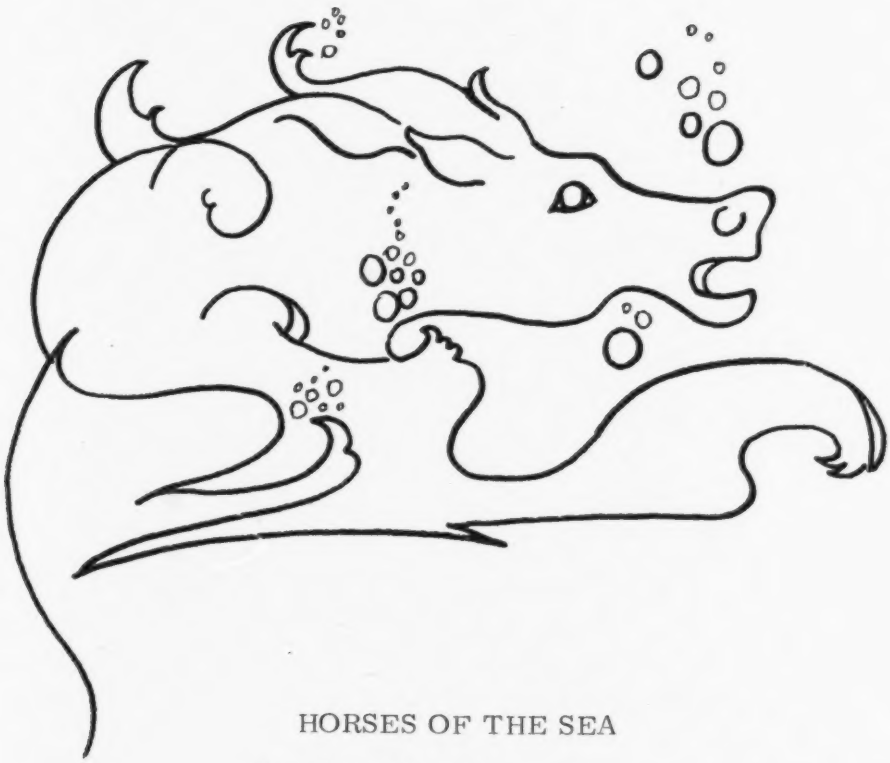
What is pink? a rose is pink
By a fountain's brink.
What is red? a poppy's red
In its barley bed.
What is blue? the sky is blue
Where the clouds float thro'.
What is white? a swan is white
Sailing in the light.
What is yellow? pears are yellow,
Rich and ripe and mellow.
What is green? the grass is green,
With small flowers between.
What is violet? clouds are violet
In the summer twilight.
What is orange? Why, an orange,
Just an orange!

--Christina G. Rossetti

OOPS!

I finished my igloo the other day,
had a house-warming party
and it melted away.

--W. V.

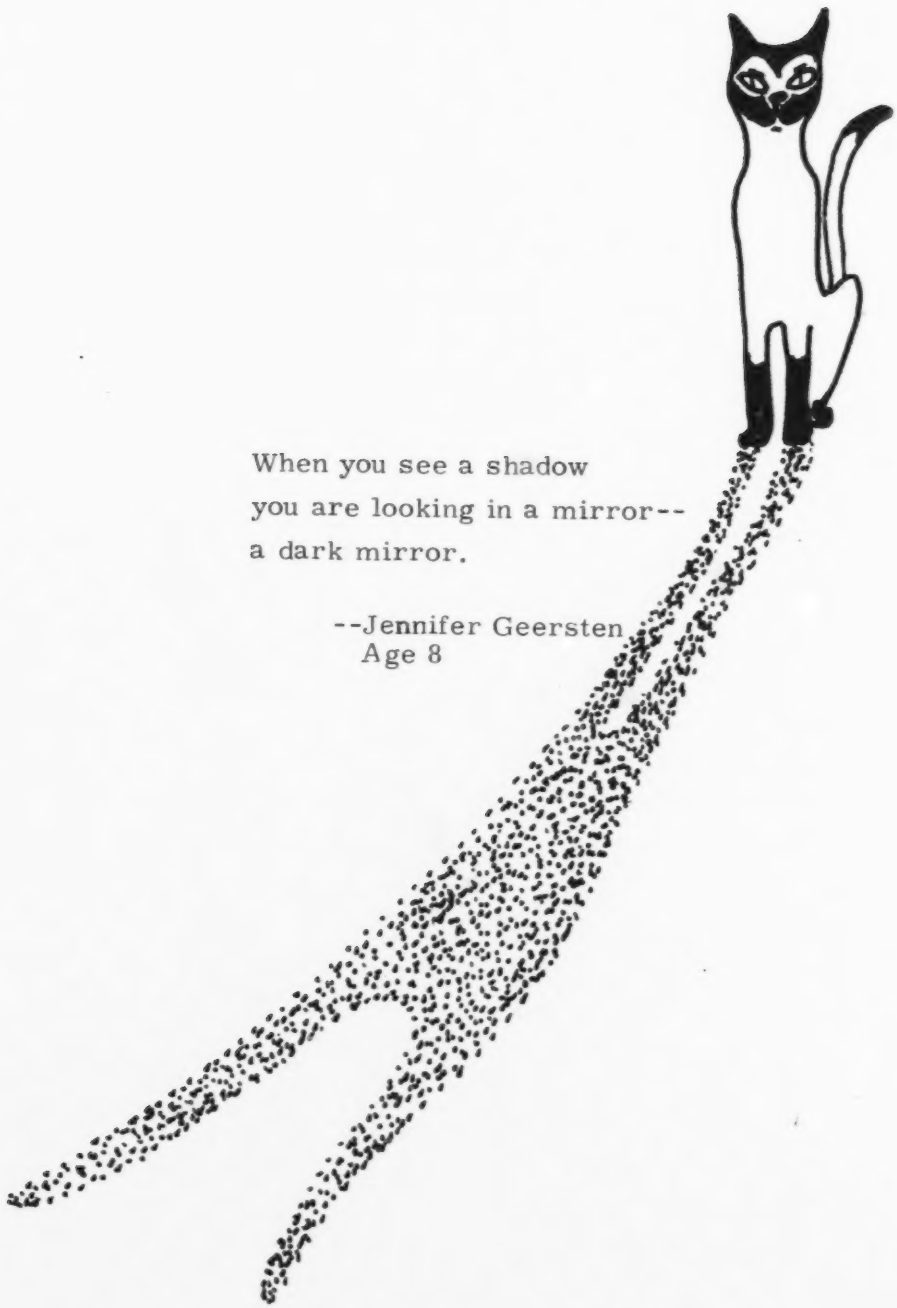


HORSES OF THE SEA

The horses of the sea
    Rear a foaming crest,
But the horses of the land
    Serve us the best.

The horses of the land
    Munch corn and clover,
While the foaming sea-horses
    Toss and turn over.

--Christina G. Rossetti



When you see a shadow
you are looking in a mirror--
a dark mirror.

--Jennifer Geersten
Age 8

p. 30 ("Paper Boats")

This poem should show how close poetry can come to being prose--and still be poetry. Again, poems do not necessarily rhyme or have regular rhythm (this is especially true of modern poetry). You might have the class discuss what makes this a poem.

"Paper Boats, from The Crescent Moon, by Rabindranath Tagore. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913.

SKY EATING

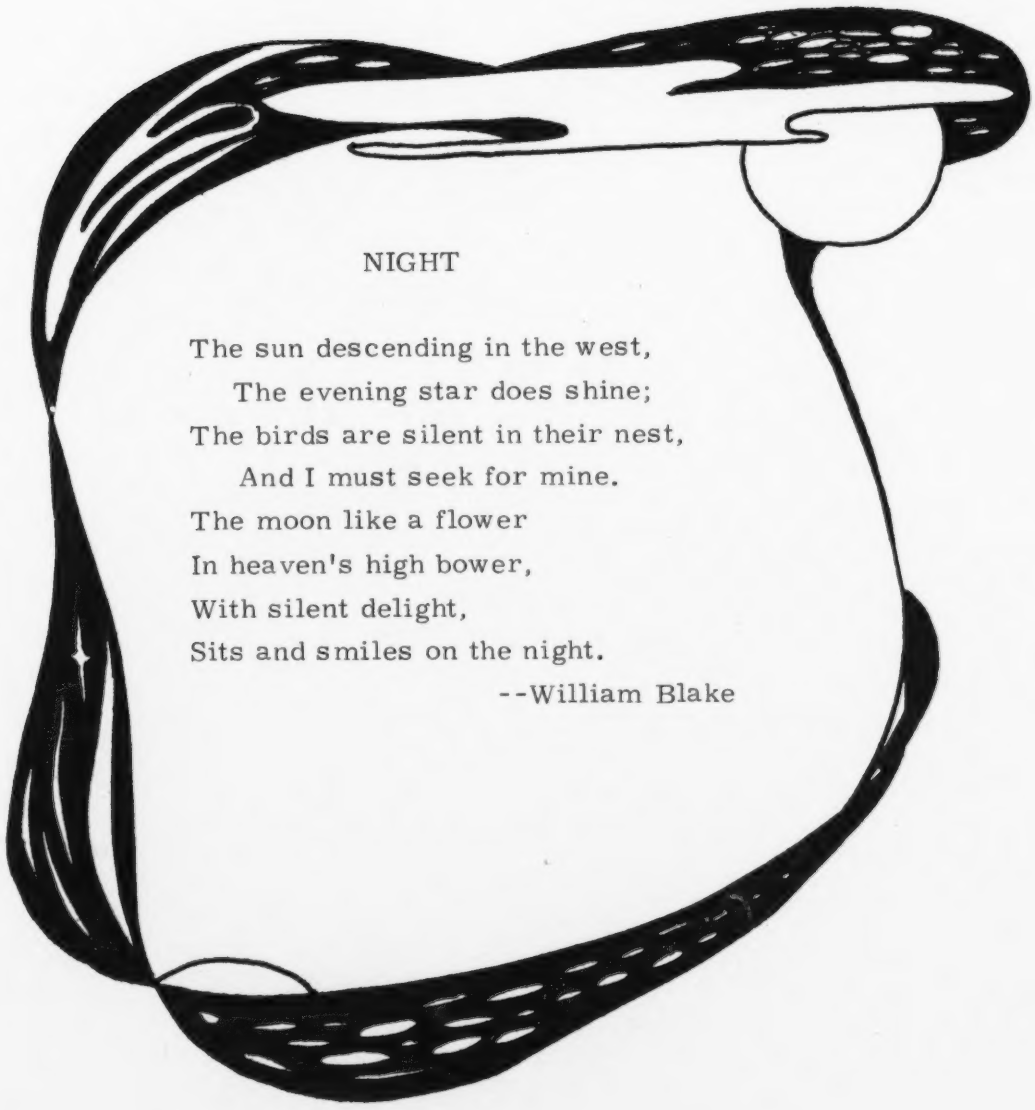
Have you tasted the sky,
tilted back your head
as you lay in the grass,
bitten off a big blue mouthful?
If you haven't yet, you should--
but don't take too much.
I did once and got
clouds in my belly.

--W. V.

WANDERING THOUGHTS

As I lie in bed at night,
I close my eyes and think.
I let my mind go wild
like a lion that is free.
I think my mind is like March--
it starts with wild thoughts,
like a lion, and goes out
like a lamb in deep sleep.

--Caroline Piehl
Age 9



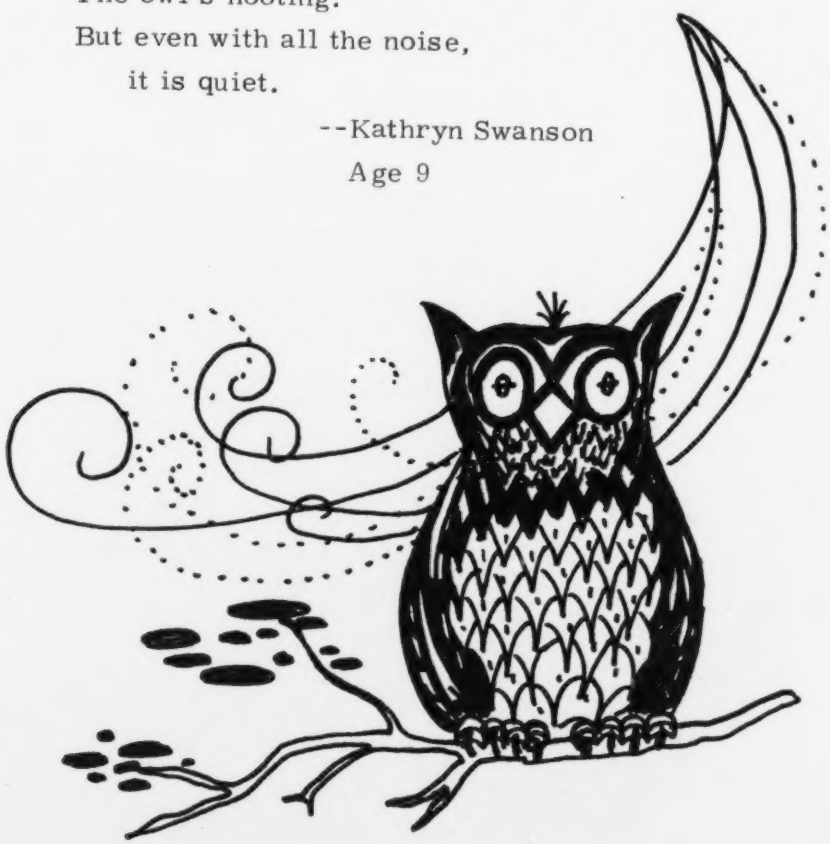
NIGHT

The sun descending in the west,
The evening star does shine;
The birds are silent in their nest,
And I must seek for mine.
The moon like a flower
In heaven's high bower,
With silent delight,
Sits and smiles on the night.

--William Blake

The woods in the night.
The wind whistling,
the leaves blowing making
the slightest sound,
but still you can hear it
because it's quiet, dark, lonely.
The animals tramping through
the soft, wet ground.
The owl's hooting.
But even with all the noise,
it is quiet.

--Kathryn Swanson
Age 9



p. 35 ("The Hag")

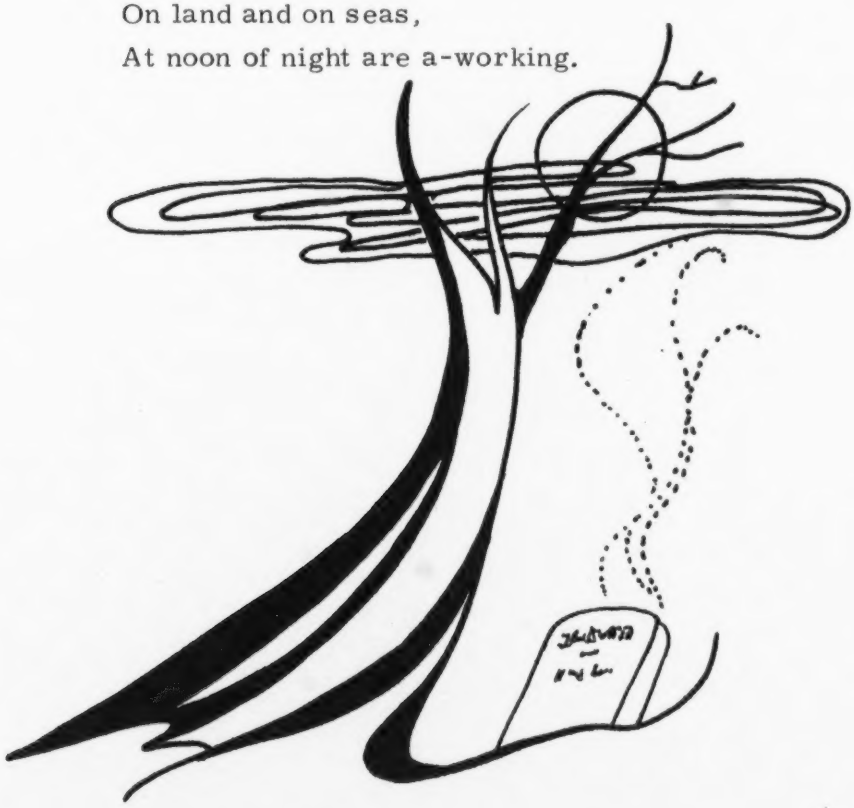
Suggestion: Use this as a Halloween poem.

THE HAG

The Hag is astride,
This night for to ride;
The Devil and she together;
Through thick and through thin,
Now out and then in,
Though ne'er so foul be the weather.

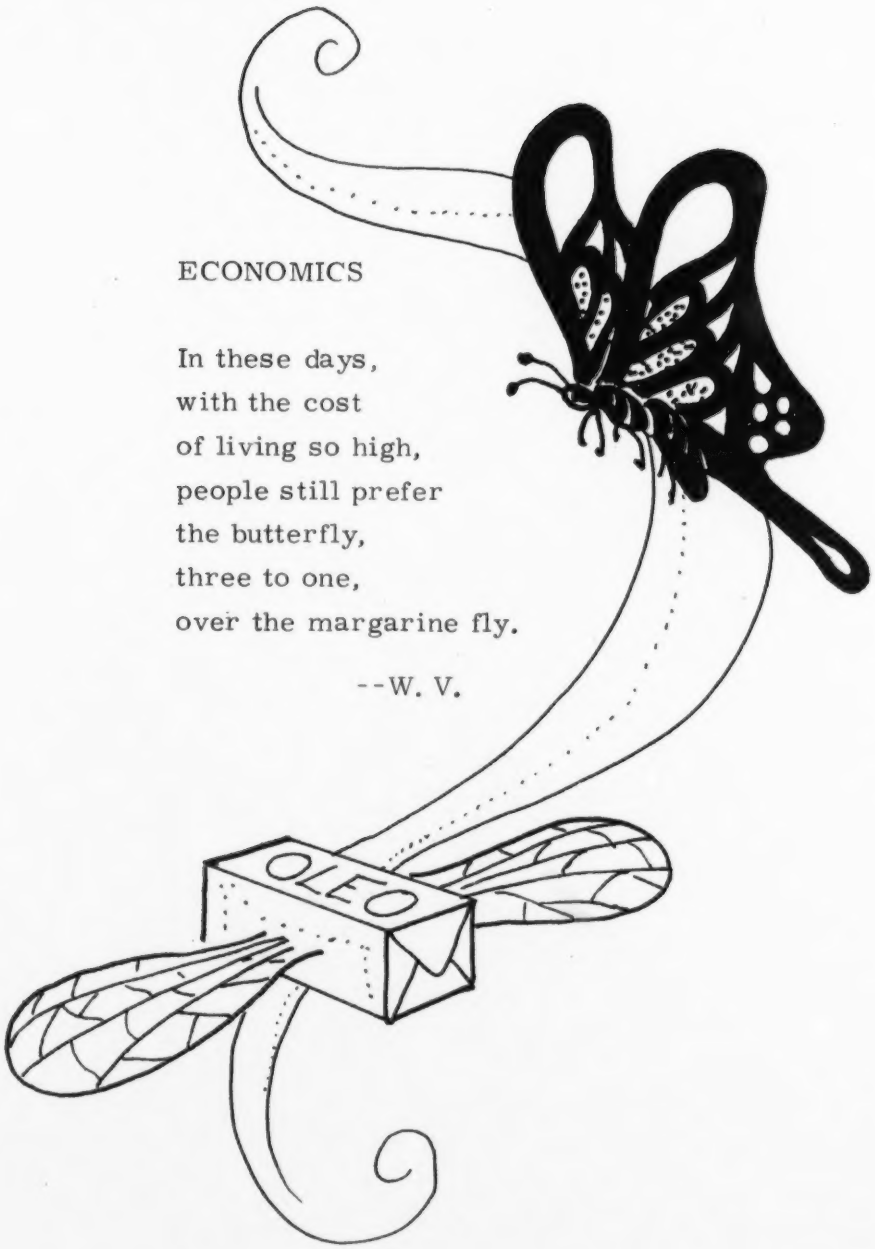
A thorn or a burr
She takes for a spur,
With a lash of a bramble she rides now;
Through brakes and through briars,
O'er ditches and mires,
She follows the Spirit that guides now.

No beast, for his food
Dares now range the wood,
But hushed in his lair he lies lurking;
While mischiefs, by these,
On land and on seas,
At noon of night are a-working.



The storm will arise
And trouble the skies;
This night, and more for the wonder,
The ghost from the tomb
Affrighted shall come,
Called out by the clap of the thunder.

--Robert Herrick



ECONOMICS

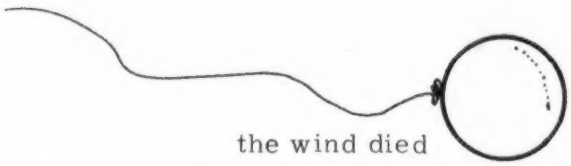
In these days,
with the cost
of living so high,
people still prefer
the butterfly,
three to one,
over the margarine fly.

--W. V.

METEOROLOGY

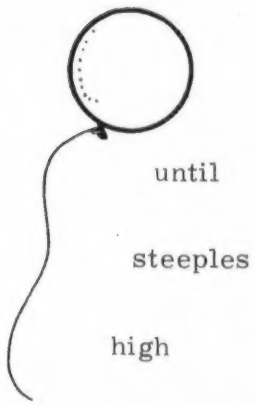
From high up
on this mountain,
the river runs
like a string
the ocean is winding in.

--W. V.



the wind died

down.



Then it drifted

down

to

a

rosebush

where it

e n d e d

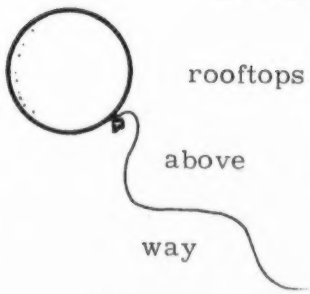
until

steeples

high

many

and darted



rooftops

above

way

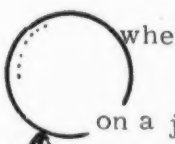
it's

j o u r n e y

It started

let it go.

POP!



when a small child

on a journey

set off

A blue balloon

--Sharon Randall

Age 8

p. 40 ("Casey Jones")

Song verse helps reveal the sound of poetry. All poetry has sound as an important element, even the most modern, the most prosaic poetry. Poems should be read aloud, especially in class.

CASEY JONES

Come all you rounders if you want to hear
The story of a brave engineer;
Casey Jones was the hogger's name,
On a big eight-wheeler, boys, he won his fame.
Caller called Casey at half-past four,
He kissed his wife at the station door,
Mounted to the cabin with orders in his hand,
And took his farewell trip to the promised land.

Casey Jones, he mounted to the cabin,
Casey Jones, with his orders in his hand!
Casey Jones, he mounted to the cabin,
Took his farewell trip into the promised land.

"Put in your water and shovel in your coal,
Put your head out the window, watch the drivers roll,
I'll run her till she leaves the rail,
'Cause we're eight hours late with the Western Mail!"
He looked at his watch and his watch was slow,
Looked at the water and the water was low,
Turned to his fireboy and said,
"We'll get to ' Frisco, but we'll all be dead!"

Casey Jones, he mounted to the cabin,
Casey Jones, with his orders in his hand!
Casey Jones, he mounted to the cabin,
Took his farewell trip into the promised land.

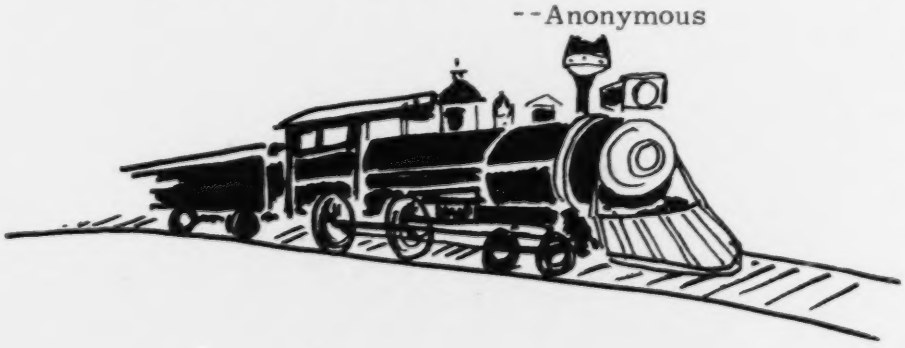
Casey pulled up Reno Hill,
Tooted for the crossing with an awful shrill,
Snakes all knew by the engine's moans
That the hogger at the throttle was Casey Jones.
He pulled up short two miles from the place,
Number Four stared him right in the face,
Turned to his fireboy, said, "You'd better jump,
'Cause there's two locomotives that's going to bump."

Casey Jones, he mounted to the cabin,
Casey Jones, with his orders in his hand!
Casey Jones, he mounted to the cabin,
Took his farewell trip into the promised land.

Casey said, just before he died,
"There's two more roads I'd like to ride."
Fireboy said, "What can they be?"
"The Rio Grande and the Old S. P."
Mrs. Jones sat on her bed a-sighing,
Got a pink that Casey was dying.
Said, "Go to bed, children; hush your crying,
'Cause you'll get another papa on the Salt Lake line."

Casey Jones! Get another papa!
Casey Jones, on the Salt Lake Line!
Casey Jones, Get another papa!
Got another papa on the Salt Lake Line!

--Anonymous

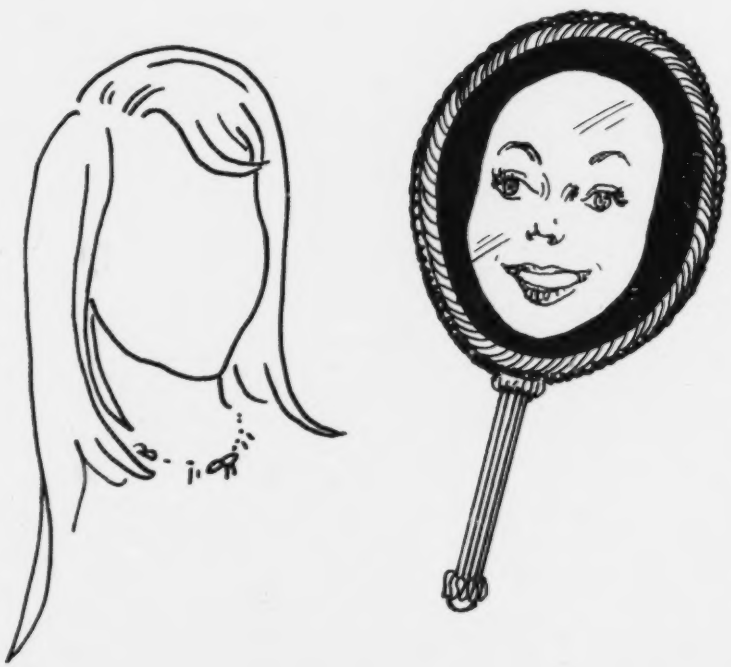


LOST AND FOUND

I woke up this morning
and couldn't find my face.
I searched and searched the house:
it wasn't any place.

Then I remembered
and lost all my fear:
after washing it last night,
I left it in the mirror.

--W. V.



THE BASEBALL'S SPINNING IN THE SKY

The baseball's spinning in the sky.
The hitter sees it flying high.
He runs and steps upon first base--
a smile is spreading on his face.

He heads for second, trotting now--
no one will catch it anyhow.
Left fielder finally drops his eyes--
he might as well be chasing flies.

The hitter runs and reaches third;
the ball is higher than a bird.
The hitter's never felt so great,
he struts with pride upon home plate.

Although the crowd is loudly cheering,
he hears what he was always fearing:
he turns, gives out a great big howl--
the umpire has just yelled, "Foul!"

--W. V.

EATER AND OTTER

An Eater and an Otter
went out one day;
to the park they went
together to play.
They carried a T
to their favorite spot,
and though eater one knew
that they otter not,
they spent all day
just loitering
with their T between them
teeter tottering.

--W. V.

p. 45 ("Jabberwocky")

Note: This could be tied in with the language section.

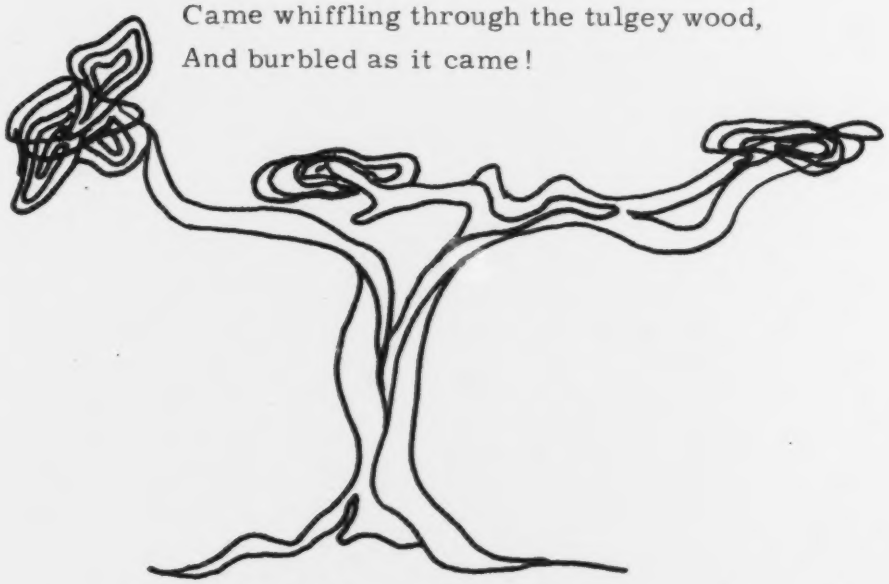
JABBERWOCKY

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought--
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!



One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And hast though slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

--Lewis Carroll

WHO SAYS SO?

Who says it's great
being so little?
Big folks do,
and those in the middle.

But from way down here
it's not so hot.
Some like to be small,
but I'd rather not.

And the next time someone
pats me on the head
and says that little folks
should be glad--
'cause when they get old
life's not so great--
I'll look them in the knee
and still debate:

Who says it's great
being so little?
Big folks do,
and those in the middle.

But from way down here
It's not so hot.
Some like to be small
but I'd rather not.

--W. V.

"A Song of Greatness," from The Children Sing in the Far West, by Mary Austin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928.